Microwalking

by Dominic Rivron

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A Note on Safety

Do not assume that because the walks described here are short that they don't carry the same risks as longer walks. The ground described is often steep, sometimes rocky and often invisible from the road. All the usual advice that applies to longer walks in the hills applies here.

Check the weather forecast and keep an eye on the weather. Heavy rain can turn a trickle into a raging torrent in no time.

Never enter any old mine-workings. To do so is exceedingly dangerous.

All the routes described can be found on the Ordnance Survey OS Explorer OL30 Yorkshire Dales Northern and Central Areas *map.*

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Take care to avoid disturbing ground-nesting birds during the nesting season.

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Introduction

To climb over the stile from the field into the wood is to step from one world into another. Although it's marked on the Ordnance Survey map, a small oblong of green wedged between four fields, the wood has no name. The pine trees there are big enough to shut out the sky but wide enough apart for me to wander between them. From their size, I'd say they were planted around the time we moved to the area. I have to admit that for most of the time since then I've been too preoccupied with other things to notice them.

I push through a bed of nettles into the region of subdued light created by the trees. A dip in the ground full of stones marks the place where a stream disappears underground, or would do, had it not dried up. It's the height of summer and there's been little or no rain these last few weeks. I cross the dry stream-bed and make my way up through the trees. I don't have to go far before it's impossible to tell, simply by looking around, if this is a small plantation, a huge forest or something in-between. It strikes me that if it were a forest I could easily lose my way. In reality, I know that if I strike out in any direction, I'll know exactly where I am in a matter of seconds.

It's an invitation, though, for me to lose myself, in the sense of simply being where I am and nowhere else, to see it for what it is. I'm more than happy to accept it as, as Rebecca Solnit says: 'to be lost is to be fully present, and to be fully present is to be capable of being in uncertainty and mystery. And one does not get lost but loses oneself, with the implication that it is a conscious choice, a chosen surrender, a psychic state achievable through geography' (1). I sit myself down there for a few minutes, somewhere in the middle of the plantation, on the soft, dry bed of pine-needles.

Then I find myself. I come back to my senses. It's time to head back home. It's not far to where I live from the wood, ten minutes' walk perhaps. The first minute brings me to another stile and another field. I find myself standing on the brow of a hill. I'm only a hundred and thirty feet or so above the village but the ground in front of me drops away sharply. You get a great view from here, over the Vale of York. The horizon is lost in haze. I'm never quite sure whether I can see the sea from here or not.

The walk to the wood is one of my local circuits. There are several others but I think it's probably my favourite. I've been walking them regularly for quite a time now. At first, it was because, what with the pandemic lockdowns, there was little else I could do to get out and get exercise. Later on, when the restrictions were lifted, I discovered it had become a habit. Sometime during that time, I'm not sure when, I started to think

of these outings as 'microwalks'. Stepping out the back door and walking round the first field I came to to get a bit of fresh air and feel the sky over my head is just a short walk but a 'microwalk' is something more. It contains, in microcosm, the kind of experience one can enjoy in a far longer walk. Scrambling up a stream-bed, enjoying a panoramic view, negotiating tricky terrain, encountering a waterfall or a hidden valley. None of them, I noticed, were longer than two miles. I decided this was a good upper limit for a walk to qualify. It felt about right. A haiku has seventeen syllables. A microwalk is two miles long, or less.

One can go out and reproduce the routes described here and I would like to think one could have a great time doing so. However, if by reading about (and perhaps walking) the routes described, readers feel inspired to seek out their own microwalks, so much the better. I'd go so far as to say that if I think there is a philosophy of microwalking, and I have to admit I probably do, then seeking out one's own microwalks and not merely reproducing other people's is an important part of it.

Incidentally, I was interested to know if anyone else had coined the term 'microwalk', so I searched the internet. It turns out the word is also used in robotics, a verb meaning to walk in very small steps.

Hag's Gill

One of the intriguing things about moorland is how what appears, from a distance, to be a featureless landscape can hide, within it, features you only find by exploring it. True, spread out the Ordnance Survey Map of your chosen expanse and you'll see them, along with the often resonant, poetic names they've been given, the origins of which go back so far they've usually been forgotten. Gibbon Hill, Jingle Pot, Snowden Man. A map, however, only tells you where things are and what they're called. It doesn't reveal the things themselves. There is no substitute for wandering over the ground.

I often travel over the Leyburn to Grinton road and for years I'd been driving over Hag's Gill without giving it a second thought. It runs under an unassuming stone bridge at the edge of the Ministry of Defence firing range on Ellerton Moor. Funnily enough I've often stopped to admire the view from there, over Swaledale to Calver Hill, Arkengarthdale and Fremington Edge. I'd always overlooked, literally, the moorland that falls away from your feet there. Not far below, it turns into farmland and, all down one side, it's bounded with the red flags, warning signs and wire fence of the firing range.

My interest began when I found myself looking into public access to MoD land. I found reference to a public footpath running through the Ellerton Moor range. Inspection of the map showed it to run first outside then inside the wire, never straying far from it. Inside the wire, of course, walkers are told to keep strictly to the path. I decided to go and walk it.

It began at the side of the road by the Hag's Gill bridge (SE064958). To my right lay the firing range with its fence, its red flags and its signs. DO NOT TOUCH ANY MILITARY DEBRIS. IT MAY EXPLODE AND KILL YOU. To my left, the gill had cut a deep clough into the side of the hill. As I made my way down the green dotted line on the OS map, I found myself looking down into it at the rocky stream-bed and the tell-tale signs of an old lead-mine. I felt an urge to explore it, and decided I'd come back another day to do so. At the time, I continued with the walk as planned and a very pleasant walk it was, too.

I returned a few days later. Instead of taking the path, I made my way down the moorland on the far side of the gill. You don't have to walk far from a road in that landscape for the road to become invisible and I didn't have to go far before my surroundings felt a lot more remote than they had by the side of

the car. I was trying to find a gully choked with boulders I'd noticed on my previous walk. I found the suggestion of a path that stayed quite close to the gill, sometimes disappearing altogether. I passed the remains of an old bell pit. Resembling grassy lunar craters, these remnants of its mining past dot the Swaledale fells. Nettles seem particularly fond of their sheltered interiors. I carried on down the hill and soon came to the gully. I scrambled down it, over the rocks, to the bed of the gill. By this point, it had widened into no more than an expanse of dry stones. As so often happens in a limestone landscape, the water running down the gill had disappeared underground further up. I started to make my way back uphill, this time following the bed of the gill. As I worked my way up, the sides became steeper. Small crags jutted out from them. Here and there, stunted trees clung on to their chosen blocks and crevices. I suddenly noticed there was a trickle of water running beneath my feet, sometimes stopping to form still, brown pools edged with a white froth. The ground was getting steeper. Here and there the trickle turned into a waterfall, tumbling over rocks that had clearly been shaped, over millennia, by far broader torrents. Now and again, I had to use my hands, find footholds and edge my way round a pool that

looked like it might be deeper than my boots. Although it was at no time challenging, I got the feeling, as I worked my way up the short waterfalls and as the sides of the gill steepened, that I was entering a place set apart. If you stop there and sit on a rock for a few minutes, it feels as if the road and the firing range might be a million miles away, if they exist at all. Keep going up and you reach a point where the firing range path dips down, only for a moment, to meet the stream. Here, there is a grim-looking old mine entrance. It looks as if it should lead straight into some dark underworld. It's hard not to feel drawn to it but common sense and the old, sagging wooden lintel warns you to stay away and on closer inspection, thankfully, it's impossible to enter it anyway, as the tunnel is choked with broken rock. To its left, a short scramble up a chest-high waterfall, led me to a region of yet more rocks and waterfalls. The sides fell way and the gill dwindled to a narrow channel, overgrown with reeds, that winds for a few yards across the moor to the bridge. I was back at the road and the world of the every-day.

Sharrow Hill and Cogden Gill

This is definitely a walk for wellington boots. It is only safe to attempt it when the water in Cogden Gill is quite low. It would be dangerous to attempt it in wet weather, or when there's a risk of rain. The terrain is quite challenging in places. The middle part of the walk is possibly not suitable for children.

Grinton Smelt Mill is built on the banks of Cogden Gill, just upstream from the road-bridge over it. In 2019, a heavy rainstorm turned the gill into a torrent which tore the bridge down. In the months that followed, a new bridge was built to replace it.

Anyone visiting the place now who doesn't know it of old will simply remember it the way it is, but if you knew it before the flood, when you visit it now, it's as if your memories have been pushed aside by a bulldozer. The area immediately round

the bridge and the small car parking area looks ravaged. What used to be grass and mud (at least that's how I remember it) is now hardcore. The new bridge sits, pristine, in the middle of it all. Don't get me wrong, the bridge-builders did an excellent job, and in record time, too. It'll just take time for nature to take it over again.

Outside of the bird nesting season, you can find your own way up Sharrow Hill, otherwise, follow the bridleway that goes up the main Land Rover track before doubling back on itself. When you reach the foot of the outcrop that runs along the top of the hill, you can scramble up over the rocks to the summit itself.

Cogden Gill is invisible in the valley below you, although you can see the silver birch trees that grow around the steep

sides of the ravine it flows through. In the middle distance, the village of Reeth sits under Calver Hill, Upper Swaledale running off to its left, Arkengarthdale to its right.

When you've seen enough, retrace your steps to the bridleway. Continue north along it. It's not long before you reach the road. Cross it and go through the gate. Follow the tyre-tracks across the field, past a solitary tree. Go through the next gate and immediately turn left. Stay close to the wall and follow it to the corner of the field, where there is a stile.

When I was last there, there was a warning sign at this point. The path, from here, slopes down very steeply indeed, so

descend with care. There's another potential hazard: Cogden Gill runs along the foot of the slope and can be very dangerous when in spate. If you're in any doubt as to your ability to enter

it or cross it, don't try. Do bear in mind, too, that it's not as innocuous as it can look. The sides are steep and inaccessible in places (and prone to erosion you don't want to make any worse) and the depth of the gill varies. You need to keep your wits about you if you don't want it to go over your wellingtons. You need to think ahead and not be afraid to retrace your route a few yards if you think you could've made better choices. When I first did this walk I was quite pleased I had some experience of scrambling on mountains in more serious-looking situations.

If the gill's not in spate, but you don't fancy making your way along it, you can go straight ahead and climb the wooden staircase on the opposite side of the ravine.

Following the gill is a magical experience. The ravine gives it the feeling of a world set apart. However, if you choose to go straight on up the staircase on the opposite bank, once you reach the top of the stairs, follow the fence to the corner where it heads off to the right. Turn immediately left at this point and follow the faint path that runs upstream, keeping a safe distance from the edge of the ravine. It has a magic of its own: you get some good views down into the gill and although it's never far from the road, you are often not aware of its

presence. At one point it crosses a rocky stream. As you near the road-bridge, the sides of the ravine fall away. At this point you can make your way down to the gill again.

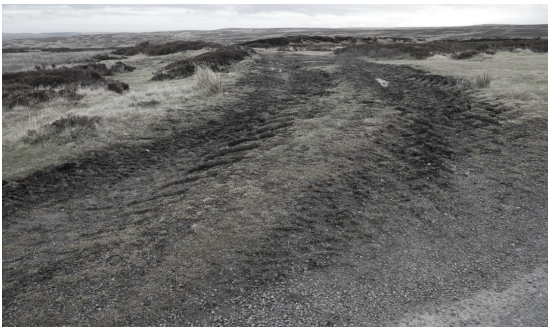
Which ever way you go, if the water's low and it's safe to do so, the most interesting way back to the start is to walk through the water under the bridge.

Ridley Hush and How Hush

Dam a stream, let the water build up, then break the dam. The released water cascades down the hill – hush! – tearing up the earth and exposing the rock beneath it. Hushing is an ancient mining technique. Ridley and How Hushes, near Grinton, are much smaller than the massive moon-scapes you'll find further up Swaledale in Gunnerside Gill but they're imposing nevertheless. They also make a great short walk.

You can start down by the new bridge close to Grinton Smelt Mill, just up the road from the Youth Hostel, but the aim of these walks – microwalks – is to pack as much experience as possible into a short distance. The walk described here begins on the Grinton-Redmire road. Two-thirds of the way up the hill from Grinton Youth Hostel, on the right-hand (western) side of the road, there's a wide, flat area on the edge of the moor where people often park (SE038963). There's often at least one car, or a motorhome, there. The top of How Hush, not obvious from the road, lies on the left hand side of the road, opposite this parking area.

Close by, on the same side of the road and again opposite the parking area, there's a Land Rover track which runs across the moor, alongside the hush. This is the starting point of this walk.



Walk down this track for a few minutes. The hush is on the left, never very far away.

Soon, you'll see a spoil-heap on your left. On the right, there's a short section of ruined dry-stone wall.

Turn left here. Make your way round the base of the spoil-heap and ascend the rocky stream-bed that runs along the far side of it. This is Ridley Hush. Half way up, the valley forks. Take the rockier, left-hand option (How Hush). Follow the path to the top, where it comes out close to the road and the start of the Land Rover track.

It's an impressive place. Since it's partly man-made, it begs the question, at what point does an abandoned industrial landscape cease to feel like a blot on the landscape and take on, instead, the character of a wilderness? It's a question you often ask yourself when you wander round the old lead-mining sites in Swaledale. In a funny sort of way, the abandoned, decaying mine workings often feel more wild than the closely managed (but superficially more wild-looking) grouse moors that surround them. And, given what we now understand about climate change, does the term wilderness mean anything anymore? In most places we can see how our activities have at least indirectly affected every square inch of the planet. Wherever you stand, whatever you see is the way it is because of the things we do. Even when the effect is invisible, it's impossible to forget it's there, once you know.

I walked up Ridley Hush the other day. I'd not been there since the early summer of 2019. A lot of the features I remembered – for example, the How Mine adit and the stream that ran out of it – had disappeared, buried under tons of mud and rock dislodged by the flash floods that happened later that year. Flash floods happen but they happen in this part of the world with increasing frequency and severity. If, instead of

following this walk, you follow the stream-bed that runs down away from the hush for half a mile or so, you come to the new bridge, built to replace the one destroyed by the 2019 floods (see *Sharrow Hill and Cogden Gill*).

There and Back
(A Short Walk on Grinton Moor)

The other evening I went for a walk on Grinton Moor in Swaledale. I chose one of my favourite routes. I'm not sure “route” is quite the right word for it as, the more I walk, the less concerned I am about getting from A to B. When you set your mind on an objective it's easy to pass over places of interest you pass on the way, telling yourself you'll come back another day to explore them. Invariably, you forget, or at least I do. These days, it's often the case that I'll set out not to walk a line on the map but to simply wander at will for as long as I've time to wander. Day-to-day life is so full of journeys that have to be made at certain times to specific places. Since we're creatures of habit it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that a walk made for no other reason than for the pleasure of walking needs to have similar conditions attached to it. It doesn't.

Yesterday was a wet day. I'd considered getting out for an hour all afternoon and kept checking the weather forecast. I don't know why I kept going back to it as I didn't need the Met Office to tell me that it showed no signs of changing. Then it struck me, did it really matter? I quite like walking on wet

days, within reason. I'd go anyway. It was quite late by the time I set off. If I got a move on, I realised, I'd be able to get in half an hour's wandering before sunset. Driving over the hills, I found myself driving through patches of fog which got ever thicker the further I got. As I crossed the watershed into Swaledale, I could see there were masses of low cloud partially obscuring the fells. It was a good job I had a compass with me.

The presence of the Wellington Lead Vein is marked hereabouts on the map. A short walk up a Land Rover track across the moor from where I parked is a ruined stone building. I suspect it was once part of the lead mine there. I could see it looming through the mist from the road and made for it. It strikes me now that what was an adventure for me must have been a daily trudge to work for the lead miners over a century ago. From the ruin, I could see through the mist to a line of low spoil-heaps. I decided to head towards them. They were quite close together. So long as one was always visible, it should be an easy job, I decided, to retrace my steps. However, I took a compass -bearing, just in case. If I followed it but found I couldn't see my way back, I could simply reverse it. I found myself walking through an area of short grass and sphagnum moss, peppered with rabbit holes. A rabbit, sat in its doorway,

darted underground as I approached. I soon reached the furthest of the spoil-heaps. I climbed to the top. Needless to say, there was no view to speak of. Featureless moor fell away from me on all sides, dissolving away into the whiteness. In the absence of the usual features to compare it to, the landscape seemed more spectacular, in a way, than it probably would on a clear day. I descended the heap and began to retrace my steps to the ruin. A minute or two later I realised I could see its outline through the mist, off to my left, reminding me how easy it is to get disorientated in poor visibility. I should've used the compass. I adjusted my course and soon found myself back at the ruin. I decided I'd stick to the Land Rover track for the rest of the walk.

A change in the light told me that above the mist the sun was probably setting. I checked the time. I still had a few minutes before it got dark, I decided, so I headed off along the track towards Snowden Man, a boundary stone on the watershed between Swaledale and Wensleydale. I passed another spoil-heap and took a moment to wander up it. Again, the view from the top looked deceptively dramatic. I returned to the track and carried on for a few minutes more but the further I went the fainter the track got, sometimes disappearing

into beds of reeds. It was gradually becoming noticeably darker, too. It was time to turn back.

Walking around that part of Grinton Moor always takes me back to my very first experiences of fell walking. Years ago, a friend suggested we went to stay at the Youth Hostel in Edale, with a view to exploring Kinder Scout. I can still vividly remember arriving at the edge of the Kinder plateau after a stiff climb up a steep, grassy slope. I'd never been anywhere quite like it or at least, if I had, I hadn't been paying attention the way I was then. It was like stepping into a different, surreal universe: the bleak expanse, the deep channels cut through the peat by the action of the water, the strange rock-shapes. I've never been anywhere quite so uncanny. People must have always felt this way about the place judging by the names they've given to the features on that hill: Ringing Rodger, Kinder Gates, Mermaid's Pool, Madwoman's Stones. Simply reading them out loud from the Ordnance Survey Map conjures up something of the magic of the place.

Grinton Moor boasts nothing quite so fey but what's left of the abandoned lead mines does lend the area an aura of its own, especially on foggy days. And there's a Youth Hostel a little way down the hill. The elements are all there to rekindle

something of that sense of awe I felt years ago on Kinder Scout.

Gibbon Hill

This walk possibly stretches the rules,
stretching, as it does, to perhaps two and a half miles.

At 543m, Gibbon Hill is one of several high points on the rounded ridge that separates Apedale from Swaledale in the Yorkshire Dales. I walked up it once before, many years ago but, although I'd often been out on my mountain bike on the tracks around it, I'd not been to the summit since. The idea of revisiting it has been at the back of my mind for a long time.

Walking over hills is a very different experience to cycling over them. Walking is obviously slower, one is more in touch with the land and there is more time to take things in. Cycling brings with it a whole different set of attractions. I enjoy both but for some time I've been thinking of going for walks through the places I visit on my mountain bike, as I often see, when cycling, features of the landscape that are often inaccessible on a bike and which cry out to be explored on foot.

Gibbon Hill is a case in point. I often find myself cycling along a Land Rover track that contours its north side. It crosses a stream, Grovebeck Gill, just before it comes to a shooting lodge. On the uphill side, the stream vanishes into a steep cleft in the hill. I often wonder what I'd find if I dismounted and walked up it. Perusing the map the other day, I was fascinated to see that it leads to a disused lead mine. The mine workings and the stream bed run a good part of the way to the ridge - and the summit of Gibbon Hill.

As I didn't have a whole afternoon to devote to a longer walk, to save time I parked half way up on the road that runs over the hill from Grinton to Redmire. I made my way across the moor, knowing that if I kept walking west I'd soon intercept the gill and the mine workings. It didn't take long. Once at the cleft (known at this point as Kay Hush), I clambered down it through the heather to the stony bed of the gill and made my way up it. It gradually became less and less deep and I finally found myself stepping out, back onto the open moor. The ground was rough and had obviously been mined. Here and there there were spoil heaps. There were long stretches of peat devoid of heather, sometimes covered with a scattering of shattered limestone fragments. It was at this point that I came

across the first of several tiny skeletons laid out on the peat. I saw few signs of life on this walk. (I saw a couple of geese stood by a pool. Later I saw them as they flew over my head). I saw more signs of death, than life. Several times, as well as the skeletons, I came across a scattering of feathers that, from a distance, I mistook for cotton-grass (which was doubly silly of me, as it wasn't in flower at that time).

Here and there, as I made my way through the workings, I came across pieces of wood. I was curious to know where they all came from. Finally, to my surprise, I came across a pit, full of similar pieces of wood. I was put in mind of Cornelia Parker's exploding garden shed.

It wasn't far from the wood-pile to the ridge itself. In the

absence of well-trodden paths one moves quite slowly: walking here has to be unhurried and philosophical. One has to look where one's putting one's feet and put one foot in front of the other, then the other in front of the one - and so on. It helps that the ground is a pleasure to look at. The grass grows in tussocks. Each blade, green at the base, dwindles to a white, straggly tendril that drapes itself over the heather that grows around it.

In no time at all I reached the wire fence that runs the length of the ridge. I turned right and followed it. All of a sudden I could see into both Swaledale and Apedale. I was surrounded by hills, although it was difficult to see far as it was quite hazy. I made my way along the fence to the summit. Although, as I said, I had visited it once before a long time ago, nothing about it seemed familiar. I sat myself down in the

heather and ate an orange. A fence used to run away northwards from this point. All that remains of it now are a few decayed wooden posts.

When I set off back down, I decided to take a closer look at a tree I'd seen not far from the summit. I wondered if, perhaps, someone had brought their old Christmas tree to this remote place and planted it. Surely not. There are similar trees down in the valley. I can only think a bird picked up a seed from there only to drop it. Being in such an exposed place, it's grown into the shape of the prevailing wind.

I toyed with the idea of simply retracing my steps back

down Grovebeck Gill but, feeling lazy, decided to follow the ridge instead. The sun was getting quite close to the horizon and I would be unlikely to need the map if I went that way. All I needed to do was walk along the fence until I came to the prominent cairns on the next named top, Height O'Greets. I'd made my way down from there many times. Once I reached the cairns, I turned down into Swaledale towards the road. Then, on a whim, I changed course. I could afford to, as I was making good time. As I said, I knew this part of the route well and, as so much of this walk had been new to me I didn't want the sense of adventure to end. I veered off towards Grovebeck Moss, where I found myself weaving a path through flat, bright green patches of ground. A small pool seemed to glow, completely filled as it was with a gelatinous mass of green algae. Fortunately for me, I decided, it hadn't rained much recently. If it had, I'm quite sure I'd have ended the walk sodden from the knees down. I got back to the car not long after sunset.

REFERENCES

(1) Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost,* Canongate, 2005.